

In an Autumn Forest, Three Sisters Weaving Threads

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Lost in the rain in the forests of feudal Japan, a young woman takes refuge in the unusual shop of three very singular sisters.

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Chapter 1

The rain subsided for a moment as the young woman made her way down the dark forested slopes of Chichibu. She'd perhaps spent too long paying her respects at the shrine at the summit, lighting incense and offering a prayer to her ancestors, and now the worst of the storm that had been fulminating for the last few days had hit.

She stopped for a moment under the shelter of the tall conifers and adjusted her pack. It was heavy, laden with supplies for her home, and things her husband had needed from the town beyond the peak she'd just crested, but it also contained the items of foresight that he insisted she carry: clean water, dry kindling and tools to make a fire, and a blanket to wrap herself in should the weather turn cold. Out of habit she checked the little axe hung at her waist; that, too, was a gift from him, presented just after their marriage. Sharper than anything less than the swords he was sometimes called upon to forge, it would as easily sever the head from a wolf as it would strip branches from a tree to make a shelter, should she so need.

Finally, she reached inside her loose hemp shirt and pulled out the lacquered box that had nestled there, close to her breasts. Inside, three *korroke*, made to a recipe her mother claimed to have learnt from a *gaijin* sailor, remained. Her stomach growled in complaint, but though it was tempting to eat one she was unsure whether her detour had shortened or lengthened her journey, and perhaps discipline was now the better course of action. *Discipline*. She smiled - her husband set great store by this, for his own life at least, if not hers, and regarded it as a tenet of a life well-lived. She looked up at the sky, barely visible through the thick branches; there was still time to make it home before he closed the forge, to cook dinner and sit with his arms around her as the last light from the embers of the fire faded away. But she would need to hurry, and this short-cut had been the logical consequence.

She replaced the box inside her shirt, hoping to keep it warm and dry, and looked down the slope. The ground was treacherous, thick with rocks and vegetation, but such things were not an obstacle for one who had grown up within the harsh environs of Honnou village. Besides, she had always been a hardy child: when the deadly rash of the measles had spread through the local villages, it was only her and her brother than had remained completely untouched, while full one in four of the other children had been spirited away. The forest was dark though, even though the light was not yet faded, and in the shifting light *tengu* and fox spirits flitted from tree to tree. She gripped the handle of the axe again as she started down the slope, stamping her feet and reciting a *warabe uta* to keep the evil spirits away:

Let me pass, let me pass

What is this narrow pathway here?

It's the narrow pathway of the Tenjin shrine

Please allow me to pass through

Those without good reason shall not pass

To celebrate this child's seventh birthday

I've come to dedicate my offering

Going in will be fine, fine, but returning will be scary

It's scary but

Let me pass, let me pass

Picking her way carefully through the scree and twisted tree roots, Gamagoori Mako made her way down the slopes of the mountain.

The trees were thicker here, the light filtering through in little more than shafts, and Mako realized that she was almost certainly lost.

What to do? To climb higher, above the tree line, and orientate herself from there, or to continue down, almost certainly to reach the lake and river in the valley and to follow its course back to the village? The pack, which had once seemed trivially light, was now beginning to weigh on her.

She stopped. There was the slightest shift in the quality of the air, the subtle smokiness of a fire and food being cooked that set her mouth watering. Looking down the slope she saw a shadow moving from tree to tree, darkness upon dark; could it be a man in a black kimono and hakama, a broad conical bamboo hat to shield him from the rain, two swords at his waist? Mako inched her way down, trying to avoid dislodging any stones and revealing her position. There were bandits in the mountains, it was known, and not all had sworn allegiance to the Monkey Boss with whom her husband enjoyed a civil, if occasionally confrontational relationship. She moved closer and squinted, hoping the sound of the rain would conceal her movement. Even in the half-light, the man's clothes had a subtle sheen that suggested fine silk, and his left arm was out of his kimono, the sleeve dangling freely behind him, the certain sign of a *ronin*. Could he be trusted to help her find her way? Mako had heard tell of *bushido*, and legends of noble swordsmen that had defended helpless peasants against tyrant *daimyo*, but she'd also heard of young women being forced from their villages, dragged to castles to become concubines or worse. The figure was moving further from her, stepping with eerie certainty from rock to rock; she would have to make her decision soon, or risk losing him completely. She settled the pack, gripped the axe tightly, stepped forward and the rock beneath her shifted free, tipping Mako head-first down the mountainside.

The rain had stopped, and there was only a cool breeze and the occasional sound of cascades as the wind blew raindrops from the trees. Mako opened her eyes to dark clouds above her, and rough stones and flat ground beneath her; the smell of damp rocks and crisp mountain air. The clouds moved rapidly in her view, the shapes

shifting in waves and forms until they gradually coalesced into the samurai she'd seen on the slopes, standing above her. She blinked again, trying to assess him as threat or benefactor. The handle of the axe, still in her hand, was firm and reassuring. He was young, his features beautiful rather than handsome, but somehow still rough - a sliver of wood protruding conspicuously from shapely lips, moving back and forth as he chewed. His hair was fine, and deep, deep black, but unkempt and unstyled, head clearly unshaven and without a topknot. And there, above his left eye, visible still beneath the bamboo hat, was an arc of bright red that Mako had never seen the like of.

"Hey, kid. You OK?" the ronin asked.

Mako blinked for a full second and then opened her eyes again. Unmistakably, it had been a young woman's voice.

She looked again, more carefully this time, and realized her mistake. What she'd taken as a white under-shirt, clearly visible where the samurai's left arm was free, were actually bindings, pressing the woman's breasts almost completely flat against her chest. There was a subtle curve too, in the hips and the waist, visible despite the kimono, which hinted at feminine rather than masculine. But the stance was full of swagger and aggression, unlike any woman Mako had ever met, and her right hand was resting gently, but purposefully, on the hilt of the longer of her two swords.

"Can you stand?" The young woman extended a hand down to Mako, who grabbed it gratefully, pulling herself back to her feet.

"I'm Gamagoori Mako! Pleased to meet you! Thank you so much! People still call me Mankanshoku Mako though! Thank you again!" Mako squeezed the woman's hand hard in a hopeful sign of friendship, wondering whether the axe she was still holding would provoke some response.

"Fine! Fine! I get it!" The woman's voice was full of reassuring warmth as she laughed.

“Come on then, Mankanshoku-san. You fell on your feet, even if you did fall on your ass. Our shop is just up here. Onee-sama's bound to give you some tea, at least, even if you do have to suffer my idiot little sister.”

The young woman began to walk away, and Mako realized that she was standing on a road, cut into the side of the hill between the trees, and paved with broad flat rocks. Stone lanterns, long since extinguished, punctuated the route. In the distance, in the direction the ronin was heading, Mako could see light filtering through the trees, the source of the scents of cooking she'd detected earlier finally confirmed. Did she know this way, could it lead home? There were stories of haunted routes through the mountains, paths long since abandoned after natural or man-made disasters. Was this the road where an entire company of the shogun's retainers had been slain by a landslide, men and horses crushed together in some fearful union? Wishing she had sufficient resources to make a little offering at one of the lanterns to appease the spirits, Mako hooked the axe on her belt and hurried after the figure in black.

The shop was small, ramshackle even, but the fabrics on display beneath the awnings were fine, beautifully patterned, and better than anything Mako had even seen in the parades of the local nobility. The ronin pushed the short curtain across the doorway aside and entered, gesturing to Mako to follow her.

“Welcome home, Ryuko,” Mako heard a voice from within.

“I'm back, onee-sama,” she heard her companion reply in response.

Mako peered inside, trying to adjust to the gloom within.

“This is Mankanshoku Mako-chan, Satsuki. She fell for me up on the mountainside; I think we owe her some tea for her good heart, if nothing more,” said Ryuko.

The single room seemed to be a combination of workshop and showroom: fabrics stacked high against the walls, and strange implements and tools hanging from the ceiling. In one corner a fire pit had been dug and a black cauldron of water, or something more sustaining, was hanging above it, steaming slightly.

Opposite the doorway, kneeling formally on the tatami, was the person to whom Ryuko had spoken. A young woman, older perhaps by a year than the ronin, she was refined and beautiful, with long dark hair that hung to her waist. While Ryuko, who had sprawled herself informally on the mat near her sister, was the very epitome of a tomboy, the young woman (Satsuki, had she said?) was every bit a lady of noble birth, pale-skinned, with a white silk kimono decorated in blue and gold. Mako hesitated for a moment as she entered: Satsuki too, was armed, a long sword with a white scabbard dangling from her obi by a gold fastening.

“Mankanshoku-san, welcome to our humble store.” Satsuki bowed low, a degree of respect that Mako had never received previously and would likely never receive again.

“Hello! Hello!” Mako was flustered, unsure of what to say, and mindful of being in a room with two armed strangers.

“I’m Mankanshoku Mako, but I’m married now, so now I’m Gamagoori Mako! I went to buy provisions over the mountain, but then I stopped at the shrine, and it was late so I had to take a short-cut, but I got lost in the rain, and then I saw your sister on the mountain, but I didn’t know it was your sister, I thought it was a man even though she’s very beautiful, like you’re very beautiful, but in a different way, and then I slipped and hit my head and then I ended up here! But Ryuko-chan told you that already! Are there ghosts on the highway? I don’t recognize this road. I think there might be ghosts on the highway!” The words tumbled out, each part of the story punctuated with frantic hand gestures that Mako hoped would bring it to life: surely that would be explanation enough.

Satsuki laughed lightly and gestured for Mako to sit, the offer being accepted eagerly along with the chance to lift the pack from her back.

“We are the three sisters Kiryuin,” Satsuki began, “humble artisans and merchants of fine fabrics. I am Kiryuin Satsuki; my sister, Ryuko, you have already met, and *that*,” she paused for a moment and gestured to Mako’s left, to the corner of the room, “is my youngest sister, Nui-san.”

Click, and then silence. Mako realized that since she’d entered the room there had been a rhythmic clicking noise, an insistent tapping, coming from the corner of the room. She peered into the gloom and could just make out a strange mechanism of wheels and threads, slowly coming to rest. Behind it, was that another figure? Mako strained to make it out, when it suddenly leapt, clearing the machine in a single bound and landing on all fours in front of her. It was another young woman, just as Satsuki had intimated, as striking in her own way as either of her sisters. Instead of black, her hair was golden, almost white, arranged in two great curls either side of her head; black gloves disappeared deep within the sleeves of a purple kimono and, most striking of all, the purple repeated in a single patch covering her left eye.

Mako backed away, and Nui scuttled towards her with a smile that seemed anything other than friendly.

“Hello Mako-chan,” she trilled, and Mako began to realize how the mice in the grain stores felt when the cats circled them. “So you’ve met my onee-sama on the mountain. Did you like her? We’re all Kiryuins, but you mustn’t call onee-sama ‘Kiryuin Ryuko’. She doesn’t like that. You have to call her ‘Matoi Ryuko’. Onee-sama doesn’t like people to know that she and Satsuki-no-kimi are sisters. Why could that be? Perhaps you could explain it to me...”

There was a sudden blast of air, and Mako discovered Ryuko between her and Nui. She rocked back in surprise - the room was

several tatami mats wide, but Ryuko had crossed the distance in what seemed like no time at all.

“Idiot!! I only want that people don’t think I’m related to you!” Ryuko was shouting in Nui’s face, a replica of the family arguments that, as a child, Mako had sometimes had with her brother, but she could see that Ryuko had loosed one of her swords in its scabbard, ready to draw.

There was the faintest sound of metal upon metal, that surely should have been inaudible amidst the shouting, but the warring factions froze. Mako looked across to Satsuki; the elder girl was seated, serenely as before, eyes almost closed, but her left hand had dropped to her sword, the thumb gently pressing against the *tsuba*, freeing the blade.

“Nui-san,” Satsuki’s eyes remained closed, as though meditating, “Mankanshoku-san is our guest here. You will extend to her every courtesy that we may afford.”

Nui reluctantly shifted back and sat, cross-legged like a child, on the mat.

“And Ryuko - you should know better than to rise to your sister’s provocations.”

Ryuko snorted, but nonetheless she released her sword and sat down too, carefully positioning herself between Mako and Nui.

“Satsuki-no-kimi is my onee-sama’s onee-sama,” Nui started brightly, “so we all have to do what she says. *Especially* onee-sama. Onee-sama always does what Satsuki-no-kimi asks. Certainly when they’re in their room together.”

She smiled broadly and innocently at Mako, but Ryuko glared at her with a look like passing thunderclouds.

“Do you have an onee-sama, Mako-chan?” Nui asked. “Would you like *me* to be your onee-sama? I’ll let you comb my hair, if you like.” She leaned forward, her one eye wide with intent.

Satsuki raised a hand delicately to her mouth and coughed gently. Nui paused for a moment, and Mako could see herself reflected perfectly in her unblinking right eye, then she made a little shrug and a chilling sound that might have been a chuckle and sat back down.

Mako was horrified, but fascinated. There was nowhere to hide within the room, and escape through the doorway seemed impossible, even if she were to sacrifice the pack and its precious contents. But flight was not uppermost in her mind. She wanted to hear the calm, measured tones of the beautiful Satsuki-sama again, and even more, she realized, she wanted to hear the rough but friendly vernacular that Ryuko used.

She looked back at Nui, the long, almost white hair and the black gloves protecting slim and delicate fingers, and leaned closer to Ryuko.

“Ryuko-chan, is your sister an al... alb...” she whispered, struggling with the unfamiliar word.

Satsuki’s laugh was melodic, like the chiming of small bells within the temple courtyard.

“No, Mankanshoku-san. Our sister is not an albino, if that is the word you were searching for.”

Ryuko grunted in disapproval and shifted herself closer to Mako.

“I think mother just forgot to put the dye into her hair, when she made her.” The words were whispered, like something spoken in confidence.

Mako was momentarily taken aback. Her mother, Sukuyo, was Honnou village’s midwife, and had tried on several occasions (more

so since her marriage) to explain the finer points of conception and childbirth to her. Her mind had been elsewhere at the time, and the details remained sketchy, but Mako was sure that dyes played no part in the process.

“I didn’t think dyes were... babies... hair...” Mako furrowed her brow and trailed off, realizing that she was treading on unfamiliar ground. Nui, though, was suddenly animated.

“Do *you* have children, Mako-chan?” A little light of mischief danced in her eye as Mako shook her head. “Oh, a girl with her virtue still intact! Did you hear that onee-sama?”

She started to approach again, with the malevolence of a hunting spider.

“Have you even been kissed, Mako-chan? Onee-sama kissed me once, right on the lips. She was drunk on Heaven’s rice wine, but she still kissed me full on the lips like lovers kiss, my onee-sama. She’s stolen my heart and quite spoilt me for anyone else.”

This time Ryuko’s sword was fully half drawn as she rounded on her little sister.

“I swear Nui, if you carry on with this I’ll put out that other eye of yours!!”

The air was filled with metallic harmonics and Ryuko stopped, dead still. Satsuki had stood, sword drawn and positioned between her two sisters as a barrier. Her hair was waving slightly, as in a breeze, though the air in the shop was close and still, and flecks of light danced in the black blade like unfamiliar constellations.

“Onee-sama...” Mako was surprised to see Ryuko uncertain, the statement half-question, half-pleading.

Ryuko huffed and shook her head, sitting back down by Mako’s side. Nui hadn’t moved and was still smiling, seeming to feel she had

gained the upper hand in the exchange, but Satsuki made the slightest of hand movements and the blade angled a few degrees towards her. The smile drained from Nui's face, and the air seemed to be sucked from the room, in the way that fishermen had told Mako the sea would recede, just before the tsunami struck.

"Satsuki-no-kimi..." The words were mouthed, almost silent. It was the closest thing to an apology that Mako had yet heard from the strange young woman.

The moment passed, without the explosion of violence that Mako had feared. Nui scuttled back into her corner of the room, and within a few seconds Mako again heard the rhythmic clicking of the loom, or spinning wheel, or whatever it was. Satsuki sheathed her sword with a flourish, the blade leaving bright trails in the air, and once again knelt formally in front of her guest.

"I believe my little sister has promised you some tea, Mankanshokusan." Satsuki smiled at Ryuko, but the mild admonishment made her purse her lips. "Ryuko, would you assist, please? I apologize in advance for the lack of formality - I was not expecting guests today."

Mako had never attended tea ceremony before, though her husband had promised that, should business improve, he would one day take her to the tea houses in the capital and treat her. She was fascinated by what Satsuki claimed to be an informal version of the tradition: the young woman worked with precision, shifting the utensils with economy and elegance, warming the ceramic bowls, and whisking the *macha* into a light foam. The tea itself was delicious, if bitter, and Mako found the chill leaving her bones and her energy restored.

"Now we should perhaps help you find your way," Satsuki smiled, "Ryuko...?"

Ryuko winked at Mako and stood, before rummaging between the bolts of silk and stacks of parchment that lined the room.

“Honnou... Honnou... Honnou... there!” Ryuko pulled a large sheet of vellum from a stack, kneeling beside Mako and smoothing it flat in front of her.

“OK, kid, we’re here... and over here’s the mountain range, and the capital, and there’s where Honnou village should be...”

Mako looked with discomfort at the map; the characters danced in front of her, the lines denoting the paths and mountains foreign and impenetrable.

“Ehhh...” She began to laugh a little in embarrassment.

Ryuko looked at her with surprise.

“Merciful Buddha... Don’t tell me you can’t... Satsuki?” She shot a questioning glance at her sister.

“Don’t trouble Mankanshoku-san with these antique documents, Ryuko. If you would, just bring me my brushes and ink instead.”

Satsuki shifted and knelt next to Mako, taking her honest hands in long, slender fingers.

“I’ll write the route home on your hands, Mankanshoku-san,” she began, “but you need to do something for me as I work.”

Mako looked at the beautiful woman beside her, and nodded mutely.

“Is there someone special in your heart?” Satsuki smiled discreetly as she saw Mako’s gaze flick to Ryuko for a moment, but quickly continued. “Someone special back home, that is.”

Mako wriggled slightly as she felt the fine sable brush move gently over her palm.

“My husband, Gamagoori Ira: he works metal in the village.”

“Then think of him as I work, please, and it will guide you home.”

So Mako closed her eyes and thought of Ira, how she had first seen him chasing robbers from the village, and his first clumsy proposal to her, and how they'd walked together by the side of the river beneath the blossoms. She thought of how he looked in the forge as he worked the metal, folding it over and over, sweat running down the muscles of his back, and how he could lift her easily with one arm, and the gentleness with which his strong fingers ran through her brown hair. She felt the familiar weight of the axe at her waist, and she knew that he would soon be waiting for her to return home, and that it was time to go.

"There. You may look now, Mankanshoku-san." Satsuki placed the brush back down in its stand.

Her hands were dense with black writing; not the kanji that she still wrestled with, nor the kana that Ira had helped her memorize, not Japanese in any form that she knew. She struggled with confusion for a second, and then she saw it, the shimmering, fine red thread tied tight around her little finger, running out through the doorway, and into the road where the rain was beginning to fall once again.

Ryuko gently lifted her to her feet.

"Follow the thread and that'll get you home, to your husband, at any rate," she said.

Mako was momentarily overcome and felt tears building, the same way they always did when someone made some unexpected gesture of kindness towards her.

"Thank you so much. I'm indebted to you." She began to bow repeatedly, bobbing up and down until Ryuko began to laugh.

"Stop! Stop! You'll get sea-sick!"

Thanks didn't seem sufficient, and as Mako bowed, she felt the angular shape of the box within her shirt. It was a little thing, but

even a little thing was better than nothing at all if it was given with respect and love.

She opened the box and, still bowing, proffered the croquettes to Ryuko. Satsuki arched one elegantly-shaped eyebrow quizzically, but Ryuko nodded slightly, with a smile, and each of them took one, leaving one remaining. Mako looked to the corner of the room where the wheels continued to turn in the shadows.

“Nui-sama? Would you like one too?” The box trembled slightly as she held it out. She couldn’t be sure that Nui had moved from her work, yet somehow the slender, black-clad fingers reached from the darkness to the box and deftly removed a snack, speedily spiriting it away again into the corner. Satsuki glared for a moment, and then a second later “Thank you,” was barely heard from the shadows.

Mako shouldered her pack and looked out through the door. The rain was heavy now, heavier still than it had been earlier in the day, but she felt the tug of the thread around her finger and it filled her with determination. Touching her other hand to it, she swore for a moment that she could feel Ira by her side, encouraging her onwards. Bowing one last time to the three sisters, she stepped out of the store and marched off down the ancient road.

Ryuko rested against the door frame, one knee up, and licked the last of the croquette from her fingers.

“Satsuki, you really going to send her out in this weather like that? You know the *oni* come down from the mountain at this time of year.”

Satsuki stopped in the middle of her calligraphy. The poem, about Mako’s unexpected visit with the three of them, was half finished.

“And you would suggest? I won’t have you giving her one of your swords, if that’s what you were thinking. Nor any piece of Senketsu either,” she remarked, as she looked at Ryuko’s black kimono and its red and gold trim.

“Just something to help get her down the mountain safely, then.”

Satsuki sighed; it was unlike Ryuko to be so sentimental.

“Very well, she can have that rough shawl from the store room.” It was a sufficient gesture, but Satsuki felt some note of warning should be sounded, “You realize though that she will never have the means to do anything with the fabric - Masamune himself would not be able to cut it for her.”

Ryuko bounded across the room into the store, and emerged a second later, rough red fabric draped over one arm.

“It’s fine. It’s fine. Something to keep her warm and safe, that’s all. Thanks, onee-sama, owe ya!”

Ryuko leapt out through the door, and with a single bound followed Mako down the mountain road.

Clouds were rolling down from the peak, or the fog was rising, and the little store was now scarcely visible as Mako looked back up the road - only the swinging red lanterns on the awnings marking its position. She’d hoped to see a figure hurrying down towards her, Ryuko or maybe even Satsuki-sama come to escort her to where the path met the familiar road home, but the track was empty, the forest silent. It had been an unrealistic expectation in the end; the sisters, though eccentric even by her standards, were clearly ladies of noble birth. It would be beneath them to escort a simple peasant on her journey - better just to be grateful for the tea and shelter they had provided. She started to walk again, unconsciously following the red thread before her.

“Hey! Wait up, Mako-chan!” The shout dopplered from above and behind her.

Ryuko crashed to the ground a yard away, the impact fracturing the massive paving stones and kicking up a huge plume of dust and dirt.

“We thought you might need something to keep the rain off.” Ryuko stood and draped the shawl around Mako’s shoulders, clipping the fastenings to keep it in place, then with a gentle touch of her forefinger closed Mako’s mouth which had remained agape since her sudden arrival.

“How's that feel? Comfortable?” Ryuko asked.

It was better than comfortable, and Mako nodded. The shawl appeared to be a weave of rough yarn, like a laborer's winter cloak, but it was gossamer light and just wearing it, Mako felt a surge of energy.

“Take it easy until you get used to it. If you push off too hard, you’ll land in Hokkaido,” Ryuko instructed with a grin.

“Ryuko-chan, do you ever visit the capital?” Mako felt replenished, her mind buzzing with questions.

“Sometimes, yeah... We’ve been there once or twice.” It was true, at least, but Ryuko couldn’t count quite how many years it had been. Hadn’t it been moved, too, at some point, between Kyoto and Edo or vice-versa?

“If you pass here again, will you go there with me? Do you think I could get a kimono just like yours?” She touched the silk near Ryuko’s shoulder and was surprised when the pressure revealed a filigree of gold and red mixed in within the black, the colors swirling like rainbows on an oil slick.

“This?” Ryuko was surprised: few people bothered to ask about her attire, Satsuki being the more usual target for the questions of the nobles that they encountered. “This pattern is ‘Senketsu’: our father made it for me a long, long time ago. No one's been able to make it again since, not Nui or even Satsuki.”

“Oh...” Mako seemed crestfallen for a moment.

“Hey, don’t worry. We’ll find you something cuter than this old thing to wear. It’s a date, mmm?”

“It’s a date! Thanks, Ryuko-chan!!” Mako gave her a hug, gripping with such force that Ryuko felt her ribs flex, and then set off at speed down the hill, covering the distance in great, loping strides.

Ryuko watched as the girl disappeared into the fog, following the glimmering red thread that would guide her home. Mako couldn’t see it, Satsuki’s wards having had a very specific purpose, but a second red thread ran back from her finger up the ancient road. Ryuko raised her hand and looked at where it wrapped around her own little finger; it had been its sudden, unexpected tug that had alerted her to Mako’s fall down the mountainside, and to where she might find her those few hours earlier.

Unexpected then, but certainly not unprecedented: hadn’t there also been the diminutive shamisen player, her pale hair dyed pink with sakura blossoms, which Ryuko had saved from bandits not a week previously? The girl had continued to argue with her travelling companion, a wiry, bespectacled scholar, his arms full of manuscripts, even as Ryuko had scattered their assailants, lopping off limbs left and right, and driving them into the river. As the dust of battle had cleared, and the travelers had started on their way again, Ryuko had felt the tug of the thread on her finger, and seen that it lead to the musician. The young woman had stopped, and looked back for a moment, curiosity and some attraction mixed in with haughty superiority, and then her argument with the scholar had continued and they’d disappeared beyond a bend in the road.

Ryuko looked at the thread again. It probably meant something, probably that she would have something to do with the girl’s descendants in years to come; Satsuki would know, undoubtedly.

Satsuki.

Ryuko looked up at the sky. The light really was fading now, not just diffused by clouds and fog. Soon they’d shutter the shop, cook

dinner, and then retire to their rooms at the back, Nui to the one they'd allowed her to keep as her own, Ryuko and Satsuki to the larger one they shared. And there Ryuko would comb out Satsuki's long, black, hair, running the brush over it time and again, the one chore in the shop she never tired of. Finally Satsuki would take the brush gently from her and say, "Enough," and then begin to unwrap the bindings round Ryuko's breasts, unwinding her disguise. Each pass of her hands, back and forth, should have made it easier to breathe, but it rarely did. And then, when the slim white strip was fully unwound and lain on the floor beside them like a sloughed off skin...

Ryuko looked back up the road towards the shop and saw, when she so chose, the shimmering thread from her finger that passed through the doorway. She touched her other hand to it and felt Satsuki's heartbeat run through the connection between them. Her sister always knew when she did this, and it sometimes troubled her, a little intrusion, but not this evening.

She took a last glance down the mountainside, away from the open road and through the darkness of the sentinel conifers. Far below her now, she could hear a voice drift up:

Going in will be fine, fine, but returning will be scary

It's scary but

Let me pass, let me pass

She laughed and shook her head; how long had it been since she last heard the children's song? A hundred years, at least. She settled her footing for a moment, and then leapt up through the fog towards the shop, returning as quickly as she had arrived.

Dinner finished, pots washed, and lamps turned down low, the three sisters sat together in the front of the shop. Ryuko and Satsuki were quiet, thoughtful, sated by the croquettes and the rich stew that

Ryuko had made that evening. But Nui was nervous, restless, shifting on the mats until she finally spoke.

“I think Mako-chan likes onee-sama, and I think I’m happy with that,” she said, with a mirthless smile, her head tilted coquettishly to the side.

“But I think that onee-sama likes Mako-chan, and I think I’m *not* so happy with that. I think I might have to go down the mountain and find Mako-chan and cut out her little heart and make a dress from her skin. What do you think?”

“I think I *might* have to cut your arms off again,” Ryuko glowered.

“Satsuki-no-kimi! Onee-sama is bullying me! She doesn’t like my little jokes!” Nui wailed in mock offence.

Satsuki smiled at her sister, but her eyes narrowed and the shadows lengthened around her.

“Shush now, Nui-san - your voice grows wearisome. I will sew your mouth closed for another hundred years, just as I did before, if you will not still it.”

Nui shuddered. Ryuko’s fury could be terrifying, the red hot blast of a meteor impact, but Satsuki’s stillness was worse still: the implacable distance between stars.

“Now bring me down Mankanshoku-san and Gamagoori-san from the store, if you wish to be forgiven.”

Muttering under her breath, Nui scampered into the back room, and moments later Ryuko could hear her climbing over the walls.

“So, Satsuki. Whad’ya think? A long life? Lots of grandkids and great-grandkids and all that?”

“Undoubtedly.”

“Her husband’s a few years older than her, though.”

“I think we can bring them together satisfactorily, Ryuko.”

Nui dropped two reels of thread into Ryuko’s lap and then danced back to her place, giggling or singing to herself: as usual it was impossible to tell. *Gamagoori Ira* . The runes presented themselves in gold as Ryuko ran her finger lightly over the thread. *Mankanshoku Mako*.

“Ryuko, if you would be so kind.”

Ryuko wrapped one of the red hairs from her forehead around a finger and tugged it free. She deftly twisted the two threads, tying the ends fast together with the hair, and then began to draw them out, running them round her elbow and back over her hand, decades piling up in each loop, one upon the other. Finally she held them between thumb and forefinger, stretched tight between both hands, and nodded slightly to her sister.

Satsuki didn’t even bother to stand. The blade flowed out from her, where she sat, describing a broad arc of suffocating black that cut through the threads with ease.

Ryuko examined the threads in her hands, the ends perfectly cut, not a single fiber frayed.

“A hundred years, give or take. Isn’t that a bit long, Satsuki, for this time of the world? Won’t people get suspicious?”

“She seemed to be an appropriately robust young woman. I doubt anyone will be surprised.”

Satsuki smiled; after all, the croquette had been quite exceptional.

Clotho colum baiulat

Lachesis trahit

Atropos occat

Clotho bears the distaff

Lachesis draws out the thread

Atropos severs

Anthologia Latina